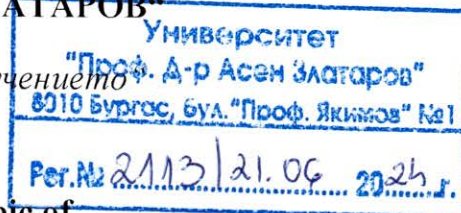




УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „ПРОФ. Д-Р АСЕН ЗЛАТАРОВ“

Катедра „Педагогика и методика на обучението“



## OPINION

### on the doctoral dissertation on the topic of **THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMPATHY AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE THROUGH DESIGN THINKING**

**Doctoral student: AVI ABNER**

**Mode of study:** individual

for acquiring the educational and scientific degree **Doctor**

**Higher education field:** 1. Pedagogical Sciences

**Professional field:** 1.2. Pedagogy

**Specialty:** Preschool and Elementary School Pedagogy

**Position author: Prof. Lyubomira Simeonova Popova, PhD**

St. Cyril and St. Mehtodius University of Veliko Tarnovo

(Order No UD-201 from 28.05.2024 of the Rector of

Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov University)

#### **1. Characteristics of the dissertation thesis**

Structurally, the doctoral dissertation corresponds to the requirements for this type of scientific research. The dissertation consists of 219 pages, of which 156 pages contain the main part and additional appendices. The references used contain 422 sources, of which 12 are in Bulgarian and 410 are in English. The dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, seven appendices, a list of references and a list of the author's publications on the topic.

The topic of the dissertation research is extremely relevant for both pedagogical theory and educational practice and has theoretical and practical significance. Based on experimentally validated didactic models, a complete didactic model has been developed for introducing design thinking in the third and fourth grades at the elementary school stage for the purpose of developing the three main types of empathy - cognitive, emotional and cultural – in students.

The chosen research methodology corresponds to the theoretical-empirical character of the dissertation work. Both theoretical analysis of various scientific sources and scientific research methods have been included: a rating scale for expert



evaluation, projective methods and techniques, modeling, observation with expert evaluation.

The reasons for choosing and developing the dissertation topic are clearly formulated and justified in the introduction. Mr. Abner argues his research logic and formulates very precisely his object, subject, aim, tasks, research hypothesis, methodology and research methods.

Chapter One focuses on the theoretical foundations of the dissertation work. An interdisciplinary approach has been applied that includes an analysis of psychological and pedagogical scientific literature relating to empathy as a specific construct forming social and emotional competence. The chapter contains paragraphs analyzing the essence of empathy and the possibilities for its development in education through design thinking. A special place is devoted to design thinking as an educational prospective.

Chapter Two presents the concept of experimental research, accurately describing the purpose and tasks, the object and the subject. The focus falls on the justification of a research approach, the construction of a system of criteria and indicators for empirical research, the formulation of scientific questions and hypothesis. What is presented here is the toolkit for conducting the empirical research, the approaches for quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained results, the target groups, the research sample of 353 students - 188 third-grade students and 165 fourth-grade students from three schools. The stages for the implementation of the experimental work and the organization of the conducted experiment, carried out in three stages, are described.

The content of the third chapter - *Results of the Experimental Research* – is structured so that it reflects the goals and research tasks of the dissertation work. It presents the results of the three stages - ascertaining, formative and control - of the experimental work. Input diagnostics related to the level and nature of empathy have been described by means of a rating scale and an adapted projective test. Special emphasis is placed on the didactic model for introducing design thinking in the third and fourth grades at the elementary stage, tested during the formative stage of the experiment in real educational conditions. The output diagnostics, carried out by means of an expert assessment scale and testing of the participants with an original



projective test developed by the author, has been analyzed. The chapter ends with a comparative analysis of the results of the ascertaining and control experiments.

The conclusion summarizes the contributions of the dissertation work, presents a list of the author's publications and scientific reports on the topic. Moreover, it outlines ideas for new research and prospects for future development of the constructed methodological.

In summary, I believe that Mr. Avi Abner has chosen an issue and has developed a dissertation that, in terms of importance, meets the requirements and has serious theoretical and practical contributions. The doctoral student demonstrates excellent knowledge of the researched issues, draws generalizations, deduces conclusions and convincingly proves his research hypothesis.

## **2. Characteristics of the abstract**

The abstract corresponds to the dissertation work. It comprises a total of 42 pages and meets all the standard requirements for a synthesized analytical and systematic development based on the primary scientific text. It objectively reflects the content of the dissertation research.

## **3. Scientific contributions**

I acknowledge the theoretical and applied contributions formulated by the doctoral student. I would like to emphasize the following overall contribution: I highly appreciate the scientific interest, the successfully conducted research and the meaningful applied dimensions of the dissertation problem. The **theoretical** contributions are as follows:

- The possibilities for developing different types of empathy (cognitive, emotional and cultural) at the elementary education level as an important construct for the formation of social-emotional competences have been analyzed.
- The possibilities for introducing design thinking as a methodological approach in primary school to develop cognitive, emotional and cultural empathy of students have been explored.

The **applied** contributions include:

- The following have been adapted, supplemented and validated: a scale for measuring the empathy of primary-level students, containing three subscales for



measuring different types of empathy; Janet Strayer's methodology for measuring the empathic response of primary school children.

- The following have been developed and validated: an original expert assessment scale for measuring the types of empathy under the conditions of project activity for design thinking; an original projective methodology for measuring types of empathy; a model with accompanying materials and resources for introducing design thinking in the third and fourth grade of the primary level of education to develop students' empathy.

#### **4. Publications and participation in scientific forums**

Avi Abner's scientific publications are related to the subject of the dissertation research. Both the topics and titles, as well as the content of the publications, are competently formulated and clearly highlight his authorial position. The number of publications amounts to six (in 2023 and 2024) and meets the requirements for the acquisition of a doctoral degree. All papers, 3 of which are independent and 3 - co-authored, have been published in non-refereed peer-reviewed journals, and one of them is in print. All of them have pertain to the topic of the dissertation and its sections.

#### **5. Critical remarks, recommendations, questions**

**Recommendation:** The choice of the doctoral student Mr. Abner work in this research field and propose an original didactic model for introducing design thinking at the elementary education stage aiming at developing empathy in students deserves serious attention and high appreciation. In this aspect, I recommend that the dissertation work be published for the needs of students, teachers and educational experts.

**Question:** In the theoretical part of the dissertation, you convincingly present the thesis that the development of empathy during the middle childhood period (age 7-11) plays an important role in building the overall personality of the child. In this sense, can the application of the model for developing students' empathy that you presented start in the first or second grade of primary school?

#### **Conclusion**

The proposed dissertation work on the topic *Developing Empathy at Elementary School Age Through Design Thinking* by Mr. Avi Abner meets the requirements of the Law on Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the



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Regulations for its application. The dissertation research shows that the doctoral student possesses thorough theoretical knowledge and demonstrates adequate practical skills and qualities for conducting experimental scientific research.

In view of the above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted research, represented by a dissertation, abstract, publications and contributions and propose to the distinguished members of the Scientific Jury to award Mr. **Avi Abner** the educational and scientific degree **Doctor** in the field of higher education **1. Pedagogical Sciences**, professional field **1.2. Pedagogy**, specialty **Preschool and Elementary School Pedagogy**.

18.06.2024

Veliko Tarnovo

**Member of the Scientific Jury:**

*(Prof. Lyubomira Popova, PhD)*

Подпис заличен  
Чл.2 от ЗЗЛД